

“And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Romans 8:30.

“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. So, we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:16).

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus.” (Romans 5:1)

How can I, as a sinful human being, be made right and acceptable to a God who is perfectly pure and holy? This may be the most critical question that mankind needs to have answered. Tragically, many people don't even realize it's a question. Sadly, so many have no understanding of what it means to be a sinner. Even being called a sinner is offensive to many! Yet, this is precisely what we learn from God's Word. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8) wrote the Apostle John. This passage warns against denying our own sinfulness. Scripture is crystal clear that we are guilty before God because of sin! We have all broken His holy laws and followed our own ways, disregarding Him. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Paul writes in Romans 3:23. Notice the word "all!" It is not just bad people who do bad things in this world. Everyone is under the sentence of condemnation. Ultimately, it is because of sin that one day each of us will die. Thankfully, though, this is not the final word on the matter!

In the Scripture verses at the top of this page, particularly Romans 5:1, the Apostle Paul writes that a person who has been "justified by faith" has peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. He does not say they will have peace in the future; he states they have peace right now! God, in His infinite love and mercy toward us, has provided the solution for our sentence of condemnation. In systematic theology, this concept is known as justification. The objective of this paper is to define justification and help us understand what the apostle means when he writes "justified by faith."

This study continues a series of investigations into the redemption that Christians receive through their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Previous studies have explored topics such as God's electing grace, His call to salvation in the Gospel, regeneration (what it means to be born again),

and conversion (which involves faith and repentance).¹ This current study on justification builds on the previous studies in the series. All prior studies provide a list, often referred to in Reformed theology as the “order of salvation.”² This list serves as a framework within theology, outlining a logical sequence of events through which God applies the benefits of Christ’s redemption to His people. It is essential to note that this logical sequence is viewed from a human perspective. As time-bound individuals, we perceive these truths as a sequential process. The eternal God, who knows the end from the beginning, has no limitations regarding time or sequence! The current study intends to consider the fifth event from our list. For your reference, the complete list of the “order of salvation” is provided below.

- 1) Election refers to God’s choice of people to be saved.
- 2) The Gospel Call (God calling sinners out of darkness).
- 3) Regeneration (being born again).
- 4) Conversion (faith and repentance).
- 5) Justification (right legal standing).**
- 6) Adoption (membership in God’s family).
- 7) Sanctification (proper conduct of life).
- 8) Perseverance (remaining a Christian).
- 9) Glorification - Death (going to be with Christ).

We start with a definition of the biblical meaning of justification. As we progress in this study, we will elaborate on and highlight key points in this definition. L. Berkhof provides a concise and helpful definition of justification. He writes, “Justification is a judicial act of God, in which He declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that all the claims of the law are satisfied with respect to the sinner.”³ We begin with the statement that “justification is a judicial act.” In other words, it is a legal act. Scholars often use the term “forensic” in relation to justification. Unless you have a legal background, you may not fully grasp that term. Forensic signifies that God, who is the lawgiver, ruler, and sovereign judge, has determined that the

¹ All previous studies can be found here: <https://reedrusniak.academia.edu/research#papers>

² The Latin term, *ordo salutis*, (Order of Salvation), was in prominent usage during the Protestant Reformation.

³ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941) 513

person on trial should be considered righteous. The judge's ruling has been made, and the defendant has been declared not guilty.

It is crucial to understand that justification by faith does not mean making a person righteous, good, or holy in themselves. There is a significant difference between a person being righteous and being declared righteous. John Murray, in his helpful book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, provides insight into understanding this distinction. He writes, “That justification does not mean to make holy or upright should be apparent from common use. When we justify a person, we do not make that person good or upright. When a judge justifies an accused person, he does not make that person an upright person. He declares that, in his judgment, the person is not guilty of the accusation but is upright in terms of the law relevant to the case. In a word, justification is simply a declaration or pronouncement respecting the relation of the person to the law which he, the judge, is required to administer.”⁴ Justification, in the biblical sense, does not make a sinner any less sinful! No, it is a glorious declaration that the Lawgiver (God) has affirmed that the sinner is no longer guilty of their sins! All those who are justified in Christ are under a new law! The Apostle Paul puts it like this: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” Dear Reader, if you are a Christian, this great doctrine of justification should give great assurance of your legal standing before your Lord and Savior! You are no longer under the sentence of condemnation!

In the life of the famous Protestant reformer Martin Luther, once he understood the truth about justification by faith, he was filled with immense joy. Finally, he discovered the assurance of faith he had desperately needed. For a long time, Luther could not conceive how a sinner could be righteous in God's eyes. Then he read these wonderful words from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Speaking of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul wrote, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Romans 1:17). By the power of the Holy Spirit, these words were to Luther like chains falling off his body! This did not make Luther any less or more of a sinner. By faith, he finally came to know that he was acceptable to a Holy God. He understood that faith in Jesus Christ is what God requires to be declared not guilty! To summarize this aspect of justification, John

⁴ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplish and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 119

Murray writes, “In a word, justification is simply a declaration or pronouncement respecting the relation of the person to the law which he, the judge, is required to administer.”⁵ Oh, what wonderful, good news the believer has to share with those around him!

Moving beyond the concept of justification, which teaches us that it is a judicial or legal act of God in which He declares a person just or righteous in His sight, we also discover the reason or foundation for this great truth found in the Word of God. We see this in the next section of our definition, which includes the phrase, “on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.” One might ask the following: How can God, who is perfectly just and holy, not consider the sinner guilty? How can God declare someone righteous even though that person is still a sinner? The wonderful answer is that in justification by faith, God declares His people just because He credits the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ to them. Oftentimes in this context, you will hear the word “impute” used. God can declare the believer to be just because He imputes, or credits, Christ’s righteousness to us! Another way to say it is that God the Father ascribes to a believer the righteousness of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. When God looks at the believer in Christ, He sees the righteousness of Christ! The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans is so vital in this area. In this passage the Holy Spirit teaches us that righteousness, which we all need to stand before a Holy God, is not achieved through obedience to a law. The righteousness of God, that we all need, can only come through faith in Jesus Christ.

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the ***righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe***. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be ***just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus***.” (Romans 3:21-26).

In the great plan of redemption, God Himself solved man’s great sin dilemma! We should not think this is unique to the New Testament. The Old Testament Law and the Prophets testified to a righteousness that could only come from God, not from attempting to keep the Law! Paul explains that even the great Old Testament Patriarch Abraham had this righteousness imputed to him. It was credited to him because he believed and trusted in God. Speaking of Abraham, we

⁵ Ibid

read in the book of Genesis, “And he believed the LORD, and He *counted it to him righteous*.” (Genesis 15:6). This righteousness was also spoken of in the Psalms by King David. The Apostle Paul uses one of the Psalms as an example of this. We find this in Romans 4:5-8. Paul is quoting from Psalm 32.

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his *faith is counted as righteousness*, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

In our previous study on regeneration, we learned that it is a sovereign act of God. Justification also comes from God, but it is specifically God’s judgment. John Murray helps us understand this. He writes, “Regeneration is an act of God in us; justification is a judgment of God with respect to us. The distinction is like that of the distinction between the act of a surgeon and the act of a judge. The surgeon, when he removes an inward cancer, does something to us. That is not what a judge does; he gives a verdict regarding our judicial status. If we are innocent, he declares accordingly.”⁶ Dear Christian Reader, if we are to live with assurance, we must understand this: Christians are innocent because Jesus Christ’s righteousness has been credited to their account! We may not feel innocent, but that is not the issue. We must trust that what Christ accomplished on the cross, by taking the punishment we deserved and by His perfect obedience to the Law of God, makes God both just and the justifier of the ungodly. This is why the apostle writes to the church at Corinth, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him *we might become the righteousness of God*.” (2 Corinthians 5:21.) Oh, the wonder and glory of the Gospel of our Savior! To Jesus Christ be praise forever and ever!

We have considered two key aspects of our definition of justification. First, justification is a judicial act of God. Secondly, it is based on the righteousness of Jesus Christ, in which God declares that the believer is deemed righteous. In other words, righteousness has been credited to the believer's account! The final phrase of Berkhof’s definition that we are using to help us understand the significance of the doctrine of justification is “that all the claims of the law are satisfied with respect to the sinner.” Justification is not in any way, shape, or form based on a person's good works! It is not based on a person’s ability to obey God’s commandments. The

⁶ Ibid, 121

letter to the Galatians leaves no doubt in this matter. “Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:16). Paul stresses this a second time in his letter to the churches in Galatia. He writes, “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ But the law is not of faith; rather, ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’” Galatians 3:11-13). As is so often the case, the teachings within Catholicism are entirely contrary to the Word of God. Justification is not a process that begins at baptism, is maintained by observance of sacraments, and can be lost by committing certain “mortal” sins. Is it any wonder that so many Catholics have little assurance about eternal life? Dear Reader, always let the Word of God be a “lamp to your feet and a light to your pathway”. (Psalm 119:105).

The righteousness man receives in justification is the righteousness and obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are a Christian, Christ’s righteousness has been credited to you because He is your representative. This will never be taken away from you, as it is part of the order of salvation. This is one of the primary reasons God became incarnate and took upon Himself our human nature. What man cannot do for himself, Christ, who is the “Son of Man,” did on their behalf. Once again, John Murray is invaluable. He writes, “It is the righteousness of Christ wrought by him in human nature, the righteousness of his obedience unto death, even the death of the cross. But, as such, it is the righteousness of the God-man, a righteousness which measures up to the requirements of our sinful and sin-cursed situation, a righteousness which meets all the demands of a complete and irrevocable justification, and a righteousness fulfilling all these demands because it is a righteousness of divine property and character, a righteousness undefiled and inviolable.”⁷ To the person born again by the Holy Spirit, this is solid ground! God’s truth is what we stand on, and we do so with confidence when we face the trials and difficulties that we know lie ahead in this sin-cursed world. Knowing we are righteous in God’s eyes because of Jesus should offer great peace and comfort when we leave this world. Our foundation is secure, and we can sing with great joy:

⁷ Ibid, 127,128

“What a fellowship, what a joy divine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms

What have I to dread, what have I to fear,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Leaning, leaning,
Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning,
Leaning on the everlasting arms”⁸

The author of Psalm 89 knew and rejoiced in God's love and righteousness.

“Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound! Lord, they walk in the light of Your face. In Your name they rejoice all day, and *by Your righteousness they are exalted*. For You are the glory of their strength, And by Your favor our horn is exalted.” (Psalm 89:15-17).

Justification is an act of God’s grace! Some may ask, if God sees me as righteous like Jesus, does that give me “license” to live any way I choose? The answer, of course, is a definitive no! This is precisely the question that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans after he laid out God’s plan of justification. He writes in the sixth chapter of Romans. “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? **By no means!** How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:1-4). The English translation does not quite capture the emphasis Paul places on the “By no means” words found in verse 2. In the original language, it is a strong double negative.⁹ It is our identity in the Savior, in His death and resurrection, that motivates the believer to live for the Lord. In our study on sanctification, we will see that growth in holiness and turning away from sin is the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. Christians are no longer slaves to sin. This does not mean that Christians do not sin; however, it does mean that

⁸ Anthony J. Showalter, 1887

⁹ μὴ γένοιτο – Often translated from Koine Greek to English as, “Not at all,” or “Certainly not,” or “By no means,” or simply “Never.” Paul uses this expression 14 times in his New Testament letters. It is a very strong rejection of the thought.

when a believer sins, there is remorse and a desire to repent and receive God's forgiveness. The goal of the believer is to become more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ and to be conformed to His image. This is all part of the "order of salvation" that we are studying. "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to the image of his Son.*" (Romans 8:29).

If you are a Christian, there is so much for which to be thankful and so much that brings joy! Your position and standing before your Creator are safe and secure. The Savior of sinners has perfectly fulfilled the law's demands on your behalf. The Judge of all the earth has accepted you in His beloved Son. The trial is over, and Jesus Christ has won the case! He has overcome sin and death. He has paid the debt that we could never pay on our own. To Him be praise for all eternity!

Perhaps you have read this and feel uncertain about your relationship with God. God has placed a conscience in every human being. You know deep down that you have not kept all of God's laws and are guilty of sin. You might not see yourself as being in a position to die, as doing so would mean facing the consequences of your sin! Yet death will come for all of us, and we do not know the time or place. If this is true of you, dear Reader, please understand that the love and grace of God are available to you. The Lord Jesus Christ is a great friend of sinners and desires for everyone to come to Him and receive eternal life. If you call out to Him, He will not turn you away. Hear the Word of God: "This is a true and faithful saying, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." (1 Timothy 1:15). You can know the righteousness of Jesus Christ credited to you! Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!